

Facilitated Dialogue



As the National Park Service approaches its centennial and second century of service, engaging its employees and diverse communities is paramount to fulfilling its mission. A skill critical to the agency's success in engaging employees,

stakeholders, and communities is dialogue, or sharing ideas, information, experiences, and assumptions for the purposes of personal and collective learning.

Facilitated dialogue is a conversation between individuals in which a facilitator helps parties overcome communication barriers and engage in productive conversation regarding an issue of mutual concern. Facilitated dialogue is not necessarily designed to produce or work toward a set of agreements, but can serve that purpose. It is designed to bring together the experiences and expertise of participants to think through the conditions and opportunities necessary to impact the issue discussed. Facilitated dialogue is designed to engage and foster an environment where the experiences of participants are shared and explored. The goal is to create a safe environment for participants to consider other perspectives.

Dialogue has been proven by numerous studies and reports to foster empathy, encourage diverse team building, and work towards creating more inclusive environments, all qualities vital to carrying out the mission of the NPS well into the twenty-first century¹. As the Park Service responds to an ever-changing America and world, dialogue is an essential best practice and a core relevancy, diversity, and inclusion skill for employees no matter the work they do for the agency.

Allies for Inclusion Facilitated Dialogue Process

Allies for Inclusion harnesses the power of dialogue and education to drive cultural change within the NPS so that we all embrace and respect the full diversity of our nation. There are many techniques and methods for facilitating dialogues. Here is one example of dialogue that has been adapted from the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience.

- 1. Dialogue Introduction** – The facilitator welcomes participants and works to create a safe space where participants feel comfortable sharing personal stories and

¹ <http://www.diversityweb.org/DiversityDemocracy/vol12no1/nagda.cfm#1>

experiences. The facilitator does this by explaining:

- The dialogue topic—what we will explore together?
- The dialogic purpose – why are we using dialogue as our approach?
- Group Guidelines/Agreements – What are the group agreements or guidelines that will keep participants safe and encourage constructive exchange?

2. **Arc of Dialogue (Phased Questions)** – The facilitator guides the participants through four phases through the use of probing questions and exercises.
 - Phase 1 (Community Building): This phase utilizes an ice-breaker question and allows participants to ease into the dialogue experience.
 - Phase 2 (Sharing Our Experiences): In this phase, participants are invited to share their own experiences and connect them with the dialogue topic.
 - Phase 3 (Exploring Beyond our Experiences): The third phase moves the conversation beyond self and allows participants to explore the topic more broadly.
 - Phase 4 (Synthesizing and Bringing Closure to the Dialogue): The final phase allows participants to reflect on new insights they gained from the dialogue.
3. **Dialogue Conclusion** – At the end of Phase 4, the facilitator pulls the threads together from the shared experience, and synthesizes the meanings that emerged from the dialogue; thanks the participants and officially concludes the experience.

Dialogue Guidelines

The purpose of guidelines is to ensure that the dialogue is safe and that everyone is aware of what is expected. Facilitators will ask the participants if they approve or would like to make changes to the list of guidelines. This list is an example of guidelines that are often used in Allies for Inclusion facilitated dialogues.

- Speak only for yourself - use “I” statements
- Involve yourself as if your participation is the key to the group’s success.
- Don’t tell another person’s story without their permission.
- Whatever is said in the room, stays in the room!
- Be open - listen to other perspectives

Dialogue Techniques

Facilitators use different techniques and exercises to guide participants through the dialogue. This often involves having participants share their thoughts with a partner, or involve a number of other techniques, such as:

- **Small Groups (or Cooperative Learning Groups)** - more than two participants reacting/responding to a question, statement, quote, etc...

- **Carpet of Ideas** - participants react/respond to a question, statement, quote, etc... on a large size index card. Once participants complete their response they share them on the “carpet” or floor in a designated area ... the facilitator leads a discussion based on the responses from the cards and/or allows participants to react to the responses.
- **Popcorn** - capturing participants spontaneous thoughts and writing them down for everyone to see

Learn More

If you would like to learn more about Allies for Inclusion or would like more information on becoming a facilitator or hosting a dialogue at your park, program, or office please contact us by email: NPS_Allies@nps.gov or phone: 202-354-6981.